Trailing
The Old Timers

Through the
Land of The Shining Mountains

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TRICK FALLS—GLACIER NATIONAL PARK *Photo by Hileman*

HOWDY, TRAVELER! I'm rep for the State Highway Commission and they figure the average stranger doesn't want to fog through the State without knowing something about how come this Montana. So I'll lope along with you and dab a loop on some interesting facts, historical and otherwise.

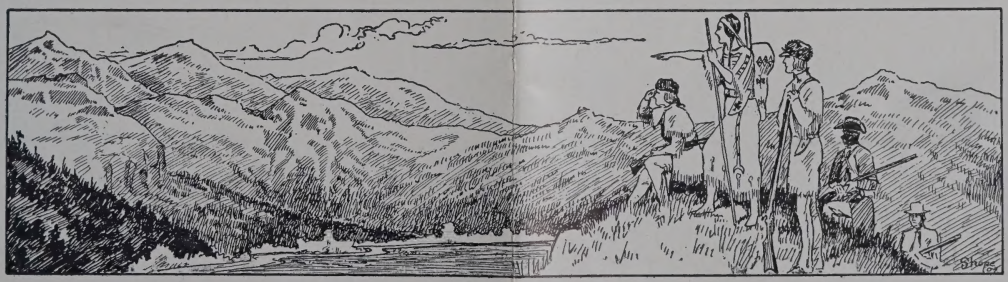
This is a tolerably good-sized State—third largest in the Union. She'll average 535 miles east and west and 275 miles north and south as the crow flies. When the Territory was created the settlements were all in the western end where a lot of the scenery is standing on edge and some studious party named it Montana. It is a right musical word and sounds as though it might be Spanish or Indian, but it is Latin, meaning mountainous.

Being so large, and also draped over the Continental Divide, we have a variety of geology, scenery, climate, and altitude that is unusual for one State. Our buried treasure makes Captain Kidd look like a piker. Coal, gas, oil, gold, silver, copper, lead, iron, manganese, marble, asbestos, corundum, sapphires, rubies and garnets galore. They made no mistake in nicknaming it "The Treasure State."

Montana is sparsely settled according to eastern standards—170 acres or so to every inhabitant, even tallying yearlings. Some of the old timers opine that it is too congested for them at that.

Now if you will use your imagination we can make a mental movie of the way things used to be out here. We'll set the stage by stripping the country of barbed-wire, steel rails and other modern contrivances. We will throw off the hobbles of convention and turn loose our fancy to range. Peel an eye and you will see gulches, trails, coulees and camps peopled with old timers. Pin back your ears and you'll hear the pad of moccasined feet, the ring of pick and scrape of shovel; war whoops, thunder of hooves, crack of rifle, creak of covered wagon, jingle of spurs and the roar of a forty-four! It all makes a great pageant.

Chevalier De La Verendrye, a French explorer, was the first known white man to reach Montana and he rode into the southeast corner on New Year's Day, 1743. He and his party had pulled out of a Canadian fur trading post to investigate the Indian stories of a river flowing westward to the sea. He never crossed the Continental Divide, but when he saw the mountains in the distance, snow capped and glistening in



the sunlight, he exclaimed: "This is the Land of the Shining Mountains!" The Indians told him of that name and so this country has been known ever since.

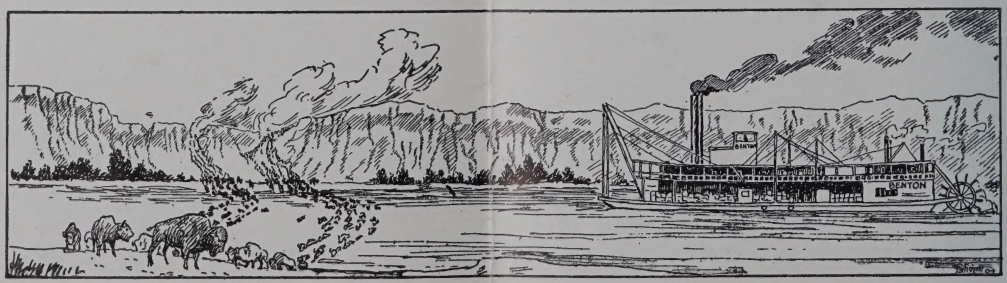
All of Montana east of the Divide became a part of Louisiana and was transferred to the United States when President Jefferson made the purchase from Napoleon. Ownership of the western portion, known first as a part of Oregon, was a matter of dispute with the English. In 1804 Jefferson started Captain Meriwether Lewis and Captain William Clark on their expedition from the village of St. Louis to the mouth of the Columbia to report on this pig in a poke that we had bought. It was quite a jaunt.

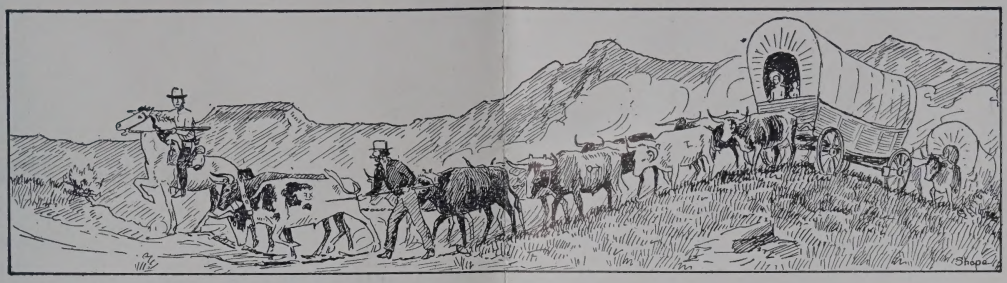
There wasn't any Yellowstone Trail, Roosevelt Trail, nor Columbia Highway. There wasn't even a filling station nor a rest room. They traveled by hand. They followed water courses where they could—the Missouri, Jefferson, Beaverhead and Bitter Root in Montana going out and took in the Big Blackfoot, Sun, Maria's, and Yellowstone Rivers coming back. The little Shoshone squaw, Sacajawea, whom they picked up at the Mandan village in Dakota, guided them and packed her papoose, Ba'tiste, on a cradle board most of the way.

Beaver pelts or "plews" were ready money in those days. Nobody had sunk low enough to peel the fur off of a domestic cat and muskrats couldn't claim kinship to sealskin coats. Beaver hats were quite the thing and the demand for beaver in China sent shrewd Yankee skippers around the Horn to convert fur into return cargoes of tea and spices at large profit to themselves or their owners.

The whites acquired beaver by barter with the Indians or by going after the fur themselves. The latter method produced more pelts. Indians were not technocracy minded. They had other business to attend to —things of prime importance, such as horse stealing, buffalo hunting, and the war trail. They couldn't be bothered developing mass production methods for the fur trade. So American fur companies got strung out after the Lewis and Clark Expedition had reported and pushed their fur brigades and trading posts into the mountain country, sometimes in competition with the more experienced English outfits. In so doing, they strengthened our claim to the Oregon country and left their names to many of our mountains, lakes, streams and passes.

These trappers covered an amazing amount of ground. They came to be known as "mountain men" and ranged from Mexico to Canada. Not a fence to stop them, not a trail but those worn by game and Indians; buffalo blackening the plains, elk and antelope on the prairie where they belong, every cottonwood grove full of white-tailed deer. Prairie chickens, sage hens, grouse and pheasants galore. Trout, grayling and salmon—mountain sheep, mountain goats and





grizzly bears. New country on the other side of every mountain and danger enough to spice it all. The mountain men didn't risk losing their hair for the dollars. They liked the country. It got ahold of them. The western mountains do that.

There is no pleasure without some pain, as the monkey said when he necked the lady porcupine. It couldn't last indefinitely. Beaver grew scarce and the advent of the silk hat combined with the use of fur seal and nutria put a crimp in the business and the mountain men turned to other occupations. The overland movement to Oregon started in 1843 and when gold was discovered in California, western traffic got heavier. Trappers became guides or hunters for these emigrants.

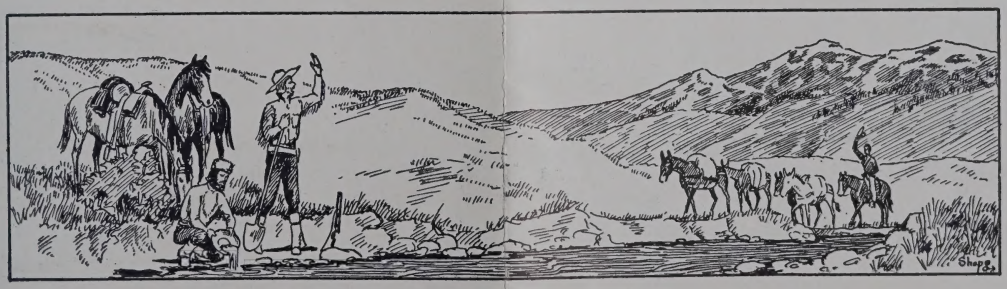
Emigrant stock had to live off the country and grass became so scarce along the trail that many an outfit was forced to abandon worn-down, foot-sore, work cattle. One group of former Hudson Bay Co. trappers discovered that it was tolerably lucrative to round up these played-out cattle in Wyoming and Utah and trail them into the grassy mountain valleys of western Montana. They were wintered well and when they were in good shape, could be taken back and sold or traded to the emigrants at a nice profit.

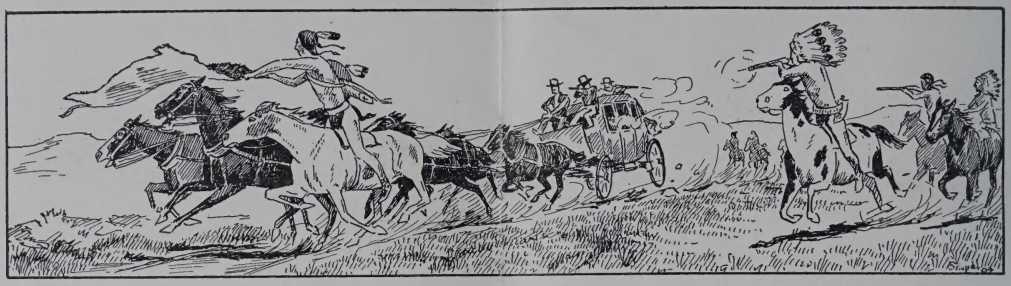
In 1858 there came a backwash of prospectors from the California diggings. By chance a few of these men joined the camps of the cattle traders. They learned that colors had been found on what is now called Gold Creek, west of the Divide. They verified the report and the grapevine carried the word to the outside world. Prospectors swarmed in and opened up the diggings on Grasshopper Creek, Alder Gulch and a dozen others which became known the world over.

People of all sorts headed for the new strikes just as they did for California in '49. They came by wagon-train, steamboat, stage and saddle horse. Some pretty tough characters hazed into these camps and for a while a good many citizens would have been glad to trade off the road agents for more Indians. Indians were more or less annoying, but these bandits were plumb dangerous.

The honest people finally had to get together for protection and they organized the Vigilantes. It was quite a chore to pick out the honest ones because a full crop of whiskers gave everyone a villainous sort of look and it developed later that the outlaw leader had been elected sheriff by popular vote. However, a few first-class, informal hangings raised the moral tone considerably.

When the placer diggings began to peter out, they took to prospecting for quartz lodes and found them. That type of mining gave more assurance of permanency to the camps and the mountain country of west-





ern Montana developed quite a population. The valleys became settled with the thrifty, who aimed to raise beef and farm produce to supply the searchers for the rainbow's end.

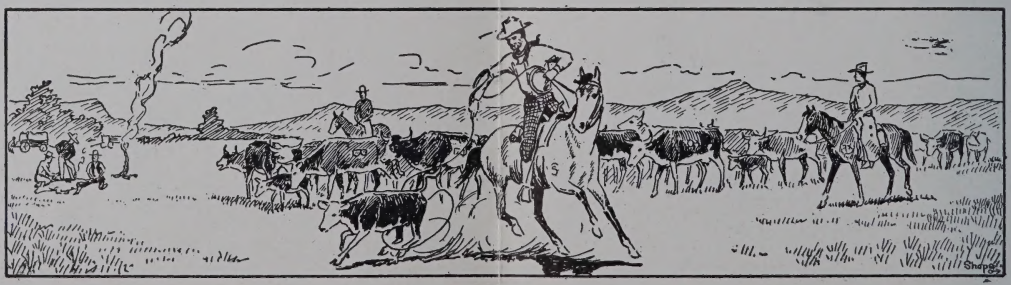
The Flatheads claimed the country around the Bitter Root Valley, but they were friendly Indians. Everything east of the mountains belonged to the Blackfoot nation, the Gros Ventres, Assiniboines, Crows, Cheyennes, and Sioux. They had been getting along fine hunting buffalo and lifting each others scalps. They weren't quite as genteel about their fighting with the neighbors as we white people. You know—machine guns, bombing planes, poison gas and such refinements —but they did their best with what primitive paraphernalia they had and got real proficient at it. When they did kill a gent he was sure apt to stay dead a long time.

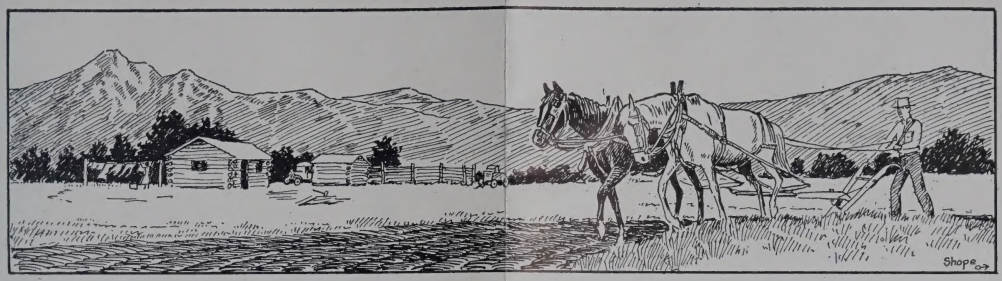
When the mines opened up the whites began looking for a shorter route in from the east. The logical way was across the forbidden Indian country, so, regardless of treaties, they tried it. They came cutting northwest from the Oregon trail at Ft. Laramie, Wyo., to cross the Bridger Range east of Bozeman, Montana, and so on into Virginia City. The Injuns got uneasy. Didn't seem as though they were having any privacy to speak of. Under Chief Red Cloud, the Sioux intimated that they didn't want a lot of strangers cavorting over their domain, by downing a few of them.

Now as long as the Indians battled amongst themselves the whites weren't bewailing nor paying much attention. Up to now they had figured that the Indian country was only fit to raise Indians in and while they might occasionally pray for a crop failure they regarded any inter-tribal combats the same way the old timer did when his wife was fighting the grizzly bear. He opined that he had never seen a fight where he took so little interest in the outcome. But let an Injun make war medicine where the whites were concernd and it was different. If the whites won, they called it a battle. If the Injuns won, the whites referred to it as a massacre.

Today the Montana Indians are on seven reservations. Our highways pass through or near most of them. These tribes produced some mighty fine characters—orators, statesmen, generals, and philosophers. By the way, don't make any personal remarks about an Indian under the delusion that he doesn't savvy. You may be embarrassed. He might haul off and larrup you with some Harvard English. Also, a blanket Indian's outfit doesn't look any more locoed to you than yours does to him. The only difference is that he is too polite to let on. You could fill a lot of books about Indians. It has been done.

Confining the Indians out here to reservations resulted largely from the development of the range cattle industry. In 1867 the Texas herds began moving north.





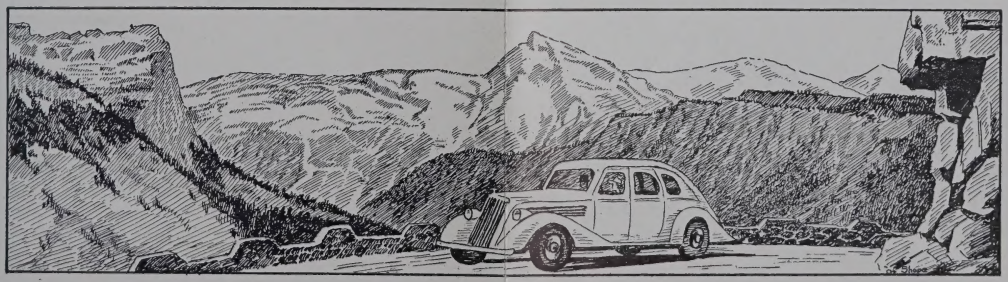
Cattle thrived on the northern buffalo range and the whites threw a longing eye over the Indian country of Montana and northern Wyoming. The cattle raisers in western Montana were getting cramped for room and wanted to push east. Herds had been spilled over the hills into the Sun River Valley and the Judith Basin. Military posts had been built to protect them. The northern railroads from the east wanted to develop the cattle business in Montana on a par with the Kansas Pacific and Union Pacific further south and so were eager to drive their rail heads west.

The pressure came from three sides and the Government, bound by treaties, was obliged to protect the Indians from invasion by the whites and, in turn, protect the whites from forays by the Indians. Finally prospectors slipped into the forbidden limits of the Black Hills and discovered gold. That did settle it. To make a long story short, the Indians, after a desperate defense of their hereditary lands, were whipped into submission and the whites moved in to occupy their hunting grounds.

In 1878-'79-'80 buffalo hunters were clearing the range. Hides were piled up like cord wood and the cattle boom of the '80s started. Leg-weary cow critters poured up the Texas trail, western cattle came in from the mountains, and "barnyard stock" was brought by rail from the east. With them came the days of cowboys and chaps, brands and broncos, ropes and roundups. Free range, small expense and big returns. Fortunes for the taking and the country went hog wild with the fever spreading as far as England and Scotland.

With over-expansion, remote control of syndicate-owned spreads, depreciating markets, and the terrible winter of '86-'87, the boom busted and only the persistent, intelligent, far-sighted cattle men survived.

In 1910 there was another change. Free range went before the squatter, sod-buster, or dry-lander, to use a few of the mildest names applied by the old time cow men. Settlers had taken up land along the river bottoms and in the mountain valleys a long time before. They could run ditch lines and irrigate that land. The range on the benches and high plains is arid. Good cattle feed but no place to try and start a replica of the Garden of Eden. Nevertheless, these new-comers, land-hungry, inexperienced, optimists, swarmed in without proper capital or equipment. The government bet them anywhere from 160 to 640 acres of this land that they couldn't live on it for three years. They filed on every open section, built dug-outs, sod houses and shacks of every description. They strung barbed-wire and turned the sod under. The range was gone. We still have big cattle and sheep outfits, but they are like the elk, antelope, beaver, buffalo and Indians that are left. You have to know where to find them.



Years ago eastern people had the idea that this country was wild and wooly and that most anything might happen to them out here. It was, and sometimes it did.

The first adventurous party to drive a car into Montana from the east, looking for the great open spaces sure found them. Right in the middle of the trails and resembling buffalo wallows. As soon as one of these motorized pioneers found he could make it, the news spread and they came in droves. It got so for a while that you couldn't ride a saddle horse up onto the rim of a coulee and let out a whoop without a band of scared flivvers quitting the water hole and breaking for cover. We took to cars ourselves, but we still had to wear our spurs to stay with them.

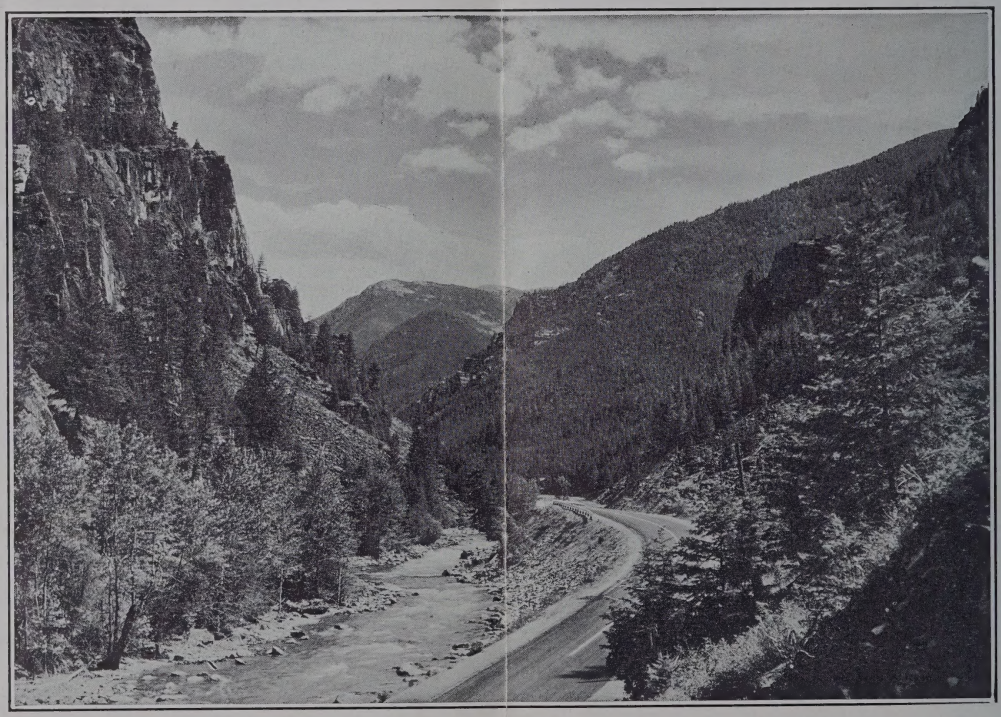
We finally decided to get out of the mud and ruts and you will have to agree that we have done a pretty fair job of it. Moreover, we are making improvements every day. If you are a visitor from the east, we want you to know that while in the early days a tenderfoot was known as a pilgrim and not so highly prized, we now call them dudes and ride herd on them. We don't shoot at their feet nor put them on mean broncos out here any more. Dudes are too valuable to waste like that.

The mountains haven't changed much. They are just as grand, wonderful, and mysterious as ever. Some of the old western ways and habits still linger in this country, too. Don't hurry through. Take your time and scout out some of the by-ways. You will find lots of interesting things. We have marked many of the historical points for your benefit. We hope you like it and that you will have many pleasant miles in Montana, the Land of the Shining Mountains.

So long, old timer,

BOB FLETCHER,

For the Montana State
Highway Commission.



WEST GALLATIN CANYON

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